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Dr. Chapman

An Inaugural Dissertation upon Conversion of Diseases.

by

Daniel Theodore Coxe - Pennsylva

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Conversion of Diseases.

In this literary age, when the Cacoethes scribendi so universally prevails, it is difficult in selecting a subject for an inaugural dissertation, to fix upon one which will either be attractive from its novelty, or likely to be satisfactorily elucidated by young men of little experience, and with the diffidence arising from the nature of the undertaking. If however they should meet with one in which much must depend on their own resources, and little expected from the views of others who have gone before them, it behoves them to proceed cautiously, and at every step to look around, that they may not be lost in their pathless wanderings. With these impressions I proceed to the consideration of the subject of my choice, which tho' partially theoretical, will be powerfully assisted by facts, and whose foundation has been laid by Nature herself.

By Conversion we understand the appearance of new symptoms in the progress of a disease which require a different designation, and which either put a period to the original disorder, or combining with it alter our views of the prognostics, or the method of cure. This is the letter of the law, but in the

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course of our remarks we shall have frequent occasion to introduce particulars which in our opinion fall within the spirit, and which therefore we are justifiable in ranking under this head, bearing as they do so directly upon the leading principle. Such for example are the powerful counterimpressions of any kind made upon the mind or body, which by their influence on the event of the disease are to be considered in the same light as new diseases.

The subject has been arranged in various ways, but they may all come under the two following, favorable & unfavorable conversions — the former curing the original disorder, & leaving the patient in health; the latter by its violence carrying off the patient, or leaving him in a worse situation than before: a clear example of the first is Int: Fever curing Mania, and of the second, the conversion of Pleurisy into Typhus, which generally ends fatally, or of Hysteria into Mania or Palsy, a change from bad to worse.

It is now pretty generally admitted, because so well established by reasoning & fact, that "no two diseases can exist in the same part of the same body at the same time".

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This is a doctrine which the illustrious Hunter, and since his time others of celebrity have so ably elucidated, that it is wholly unnecessary at this time to do more than mention it. Considering it then as an admitted axiom, we will find that under this general head may be ranked several varieties or species, e.g. those diseases which are so despotic that they brook not a companion in the same system at the same time, it making no difference whether in the same or in a different part — for no sooner do they obtain possession of the system than they commence hostilities with any existing maladies, and do not cease until they reign triumphant & alone, completely destroying the former occupants whether general or local. Some there are also which anticipate, and destroy the capability of the system to become affected with certain diseases. The cases which will be brought forward in the course of this enquiry will severally illustrate each of these points, bearing at the same time upon the general principle: and they differ, in that Nature has effected it in some, & Art in others; the latter oftentimes intentionally, tho' often it is the consequence of means used, tho' not directed with that view.

Let us now enquire of what service this principle has

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been to the different maladies to which our frames are subject; & we will begin with that disease, which deprives man of his reason the attribute which constitutes him lord of the creation, and the loss of which reduces him to a level with the brutes.

Of all the terrible trials which a humane & feeling physician in the exercise of his profession undergoes, none surely is so distressing as the sight of a fellow being in this situation. To be the means of rescuing him from this deplorable condition, and dispelling the cloud which hangs over his benighted mind he justly ranks among the proudest trophies of his art; and while exerting his utmost skill, frequently indeed in vain, Nature herself comes often armed to his assistance, and with another disease as her weapon, puts an end to the contest. Numerous are the cases upon record of cures effected in this way, and it is to be remarked, that in the earliest ages, when the operations of Nature first excited observation, this particular one was not overlooked. Who has not heard of Int: Fever curing Mania? Again & again has the fact been noticed in marshy districts, so soon as the Fall or Intermittent Season has set in, and so much confidence is reposed in the efficacy of this Metastasis, that Lunatics are taken to these districts, and exposed to the

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influence of the miasmata. A difficulty sometimes arises from their having lost in a great measure their susceptibility to impressions but this might probably in most instances be overcome by bs. & other depletory measures. In trying the same thing by artificial means in places where it is inconvenient & sometimes impracticable to go to marshy districts, we often fail from the following circumstance. Knowing as we do, that checked perspiration and other causes combined will readily produce disease, we may by the aid of exercise, heat & cold give the patient a fever or otherwise disorder his system, but whether it will be an Intermittent or not is very doubtful; and it is remarkable, that this particular species of fever displays more efficacy in the cure of Insanity than any other: As others however do occasionally succeed, we should always give them a fair trial, and never abandon a patient as incurable until by actually exhausting our quiver, we conscientiously & from necessity yield.

The other diseases which have supplanted Insanity are numerous, and it would be but a repetition of the remarks on Int: Fever to introduce them here; I shall therefore now proceed to consider the effect of strong impressions made upon the mind.

It would naturally occur to one reflecting upon the subject, that remedies directed to the seat of the disease, would in all

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probability not be thrown away: and the mind may certainly in most cases be called the seat of the disease, tho' it may have arisen from a cause affecting some part of the body. Now it is easily understood how a powerful impression made upon the senses or channels of the mind might secondarily by a "contre coup" or reversed sympathy, act upon the part originally diseased in the body, and destroy the morbid action. That this has frequently happened, nobody will for a moment doubt, who has himself seen or read of this formidable complaint. A strong instance I myself remember to have seen about 2 years since in the Penn.a Hospital. A man with some derangement of his intellect was taken there, and perhaps at the time his situation was assigned him he had a lucid interval, for he was taken to the Medical Ward instead of the Cells. The physician after having examined him, and determined upon the remedies, began by mentioning shaving & blistering the head. The very idea of this so wrought upon his mind, that instantly and before any one could possibly prevent it, he leaped out of the window, and fell upon the pavement below, a height probably of 30 feet & upwards: most fortunately his fall was broken by an intervening trellis, which saved his life; but the shock was sufficient completely to eradicate the previous

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mental alienation. Here is a method Nature pursued, which tho' effectual it would not be proper indiscriminately to imitate, as the risk of death would counterbalance the probability of cure: but might not this objection be obviated in this manner? Having selected a patient upon whom we thought the remedy would operate kindly, let him be hurled from a considerable height without any previous knowledge on his part of our intention; but in order to insure the safety of his life, let him be received upon a bed some distance from the ground: this rude idea however might be improved in many ways to suit the particular circumstances of each case. The modus operandi of such a remedy might most likely be found in the fright occasioned, & the strong impression it would certainly make upon any man. - - - - In the same institution, several cases of Insanity were cured by inducing Dyspepsia.

Gout is another disease which illustrates the efficacy of this principle. Cullen in his treatise upon this genteel complaint takes particular notice of several cases, tho' he does not mention from whence he took them.

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He says — "there are histories of cases of the Gout in which it is said, that by great emotions of mind, by wounds, & by other accidents the symptoms have been suddenly relieved, & never again returned; but how far these accidental cures might be imitated by art, or would succeed in other cases is at least extremely uncertain." Here is a disease which ranks among the opprobria medicorum, and in which by the means already known there is rarely effected a permanent cure, said to have been relieved & prevented from returning — & by what? Fright, wounds &c, remedies which it is always in our power to make subservient to our purposes. Are we not justifiable then, until Science shall shed more light upon the nature & treatment of this complaint, in using means which have succeeded, & may again in the very cases under our care? They may indeed fail in many cases, but as we lose nothing, & may by experience ascertain those cases to which they are applicable, we have every reason to give the practice a fair consideration.

Independent of these strong impressions, which exert their influence immediately upon the mind, we find Gout oftentimes relieved by Cutaneous diseases, by an attack of Hepatitis &c, — the morbific matter being removed from one part of the system to another; and it is more than probable that when

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patients who were subject to fits of the Gout at stated times, have happened to miss an attack, the cause has been, the existence at that time of some other disease preventing its occurrence.

We next come to Consumption. That this is not often cured by the common means pursued, is alas too notorious to require any remarks. We will see then, if our present principle holds out any hopes of better prospects. Much consolation will not I fear be derived from a review of the cases in which Medicine has excited a new disease. They are few – and of those few, the Mercurial disease in number & importance ranks highest. It has certainly occasionally succeeded, & as certainly often failed – from what circumstance we do not precisely know; tho' it seems to be from the stage in which it was given, and the manner in which it was employed. To inquire by what means we might arrive at positive rules for its administration is foreign to our subject: we merely notice the circumstance, & will now examine the atchievements of Nature. These are sometimes of the most brilliant kind & almost miraculous, for they have often been performed at the most advanced periods. Several cases are to be met with in Rush's inquiries upon the authority of Dr Blane of consumptive persons being relieved & some completely cured by the terror which a violent hurricane created.

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Van Swieten & Smollet also both relate cases of Consumption cured by the patients falling into streams of cold water – affording examples of partial & unequal action being suddenly changed into general & equal excitement in every part of the system. And when a sea voyage cures this same fell destroyer of the human race, upon what principle is it? A cholera is excited, a deathlike nausea pervades the whole frame, changing the diseased action of the lungs to a healthy & restorative condition, and thus by breaking down the morbid association which exists, causes that healthy reaction to supervene which will in time restore the broken constitution. The following striking case of medicinal conversion mentioned by Dr Percival should more properly have been noticed before, but it will not be amiss here. "A gentleman of rank in this Co. was in an advanced state of what is called a galloping Consumption, having an incessant cough, an expectoration apparently purulent, continued heats & night sweats. Yet his cure was accomplished by giving wine whey copiously & by administering doses of Hartshorn & spermaceti. A gentle fit of the Gout was produced by this cordial regimen, the fever, cough & spitting progressively abated, and the health of the patient was soon perfectly reestablished". Efforts of this kind are also

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occasionally made spontaneously at the close of phthisical complaints; but the patients are generally too completely reduced to derive much benefit from them, although the foot may inflame considerably.

Whooping Cough is a disease perplexing in its management, & apparently not well understood by the most correct pathologists. From the frequent failure of attempts to arrest its course, physicians at present mostly content themselves with watching & assisting the efforts of Nature, without taking the management out of her hands. The majority of cases will perhaps in this way terminate happily, for the vis medicatrix Naturæ is a powerful principle & generally acts in the most judicious manner; but unfortunately it is not the case in every instance, as we see every day in hemorrhages, where if Nature were not counteracted, the most unhappy consequences might result. We find also many instances of Whooping Cough where the disease is tediously protracted & leaves behind it some most unpleasant consequences; these are a long time disappearing & prove exceedingly harassing to the constitution. Now if the question be asked, whether this has any connection with our subject, we answer yes! & prove it by asserting

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that many cases have been speedily & effectually cured by the superventeion of other diseases. Of these I will mention particularly, Vaccination as having been the most effectual, & more immediately under our controul. It was observed by some physicians of this country who vaccinated children with the Whooping Cough, that this last disease gave way much more rapidly than they anticipated, or were accustomed to see it. Suspecting Vaccination was the cause they repeated the experiment, & found in every instance the disease to be abated or speedily checked. But Whooping Cough is not the only disease in which we can call Vaccination to our assistance: it has again & again subdued Cutaneous diseases, & amongst others Tinea Capitis, an obstinate disorder. Cases of this kind may be met with in the Med: Museum & elsewhere, and sufficiently important they are to merit our attention, for by analogy we may be led to use it successfully in a greater variety of cases. Suppose however we should wish to do something of the kind in a patient who had been vaccinated. We will find many of this kind, & we must then resort to something else. Scabies presents itself as easily induced & often effectual. Some would say the remedy is disgusting & worse than the disease; but it is not so in itself, & arises merely from the association in idea of Itch with filth. Intentionally induced this would not hold, & having continued

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The disease produced by Mercury affords another example of the cogency & utility of a conversion. Changing in its progress the perverted functions of the system upon which so many of our chronic complaints depend, it subverts the existing associations, and establishing its own peculiar action, enables the system to bear up against the pressure of disease. Indeed, what has it not cured? Mania, Consumption, Tetanus, & Hydrophobia with many other of the opprobria medicorum have been stripped of their terrors at the approach & attack of this formidable agent, & each revolving Sun announces to the world some new & glorious victory atchieved by this Samson. So sensible are physicians of its extensive utility & powerful operation that they retain it as a corps de reserve, trusting at the first to more lenient measures, in the confidence that when other means have failed, this trusty servant is still at their command with ability to serve. Administered with judgement & in a cautious & prudent manner, those terrible effects which deter many from its employment are no longer to be dreaded unless in some idiosyncrasy of constitution, which in our imperfect state of knowledge cannot beforehand be distinguished.

Such a contrariety of opinions exists with regard to the

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modus operandi of Blisters, that we might at first be led to suppose no correct rationale has as yet been offered; but these contradictory statements may all be reconciled, when we consider that in different circumstances their action is totally different, and that like a two edged sword, they answer a double purpose. Sometimes by their stimulus upon the external surface, they cause reaction in low conditions of the system; at others they bring down excitement; and are often the most effectual remedies for promoting absorption.

While residing in the Alms house of this City, I had numerous opportunities of observing the changes for better & worse produced upon the patients by the Epidemics which frequently arise in such an Institution, and there also was I convinced of the truth of that precept which warns us of the danger arising from the too sudden removal of a long established morbid affection: such as Ulcers, Fistulæ, or drains of any kind. The metastasis on these occasions is generally unfavorable, endangering important parts.

There are some persons who believe in the identity of hereditary diseases, and who upon the slightest warning of the

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approach of any of these, prefer as the least of two evils producing ulcers in some part of the glandular system, which by drawing off the morbific matter, ward off the threatened danger. How important then is the knowledge of this fact, which enables us to preserve many an important life from an untimely end, or what is even worse, a destruction of the mind. In a system with this predisposition, the first symptom should be regarded with attention & the disease nipped in the bud.

Having now treated of a few of the many conversions, which so frequently happen, I shall in drawing to a conclusion, enumerate the following heads, to which perhaps all cases may be conveniently referred.

(1.) The supervening disease may be produced by the remote causes of the original disorder: in this case the action of those causes after producing its first effect is prolonged so as to excite a new train of symptoms.

(2.) The supervening disease may arise from the excess or combination of the original symptoms.

(3.) The state of the habit produced by the first disease may give rise to a new disorder.

(4.) Conversions may happen from the imprudent suppression of habitual diseases. — Anomalous cases may occur from many sources.

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From a review then of all that has gone before, it appears, that many conversions are processes instituted by Nature for the cure of diseases, and that some of our most active remedies operate in a similar manner. We may not only therefore improve the history of diseases but the practice of Medicine by paying closer attention to the connection & operation of disorders upon each other. In pursuing this train of observation, we may be confident that we are really following the order of Nature, and that the result will be, not an arbitrary system, but an accession of solid & applicable knowledge. A foundation may thus be laid for a natural arrangement of diseases, and a just theory of the sanative motions of the human system. These are splendid objects for the ambition of future ages, to which we can only hope to contribute a few materials.

As the word Incurable has been mentioned in the course of these remarks, it may not be improper to make a few observations upon the subject. The word seems altogether to be improper & inapplicable, and arises from the imperfect state of our knowledge: for can any one suppose for a moment, that the All merciful Almighty would impose upon us the most afflicting disorders, and not allow us the means of relief? The idea is inconsistent with that opinion of his

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goodness which he himself has implanted in our minds. No! their being so is partly to be attributed to our thinking them so, and on that account neglecting to give to them that particular & persevering attention which in the end might be crowned with success. Perfection in Medicine, if ever to be attained, will only be by the utmost labour of one & all of its votaries: and each age starting from the point at which its predecessors have arrived with the most conclusive certainty, should exert its energies, that at length the superstructure of that most noble edifice might be finished, the foundation of which has been so long since laid. There is nothing indeed in Medicine more to be deprecated than Despair, or giving up as Incurable diseases which may have baffled well directed efforts. How often is the physician agreeably disappointed, tho' at the same time mortified at the fallability of his prognostic; & how often when all human means have failed, has the hand of the Almighty been seen stretching forth relief in the shape of a new disease, signifying in the most direct manner, the means we should have used, & the honour which such a case would have reflected upon us. We sometimes overshoot the mark, which is equally bad with falling short; and the Art of proportioning the means to the end is the

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To conclude — This subject of conversion is a boundless field; to cultivate which would require more time & labour than would be proper or necessary to employ upon the present occasion; but to any person qualified & willing to examine thoroughly the nature of the ground, it would afford an abundant harvest. Should he even be disappointed in his expectations as to the result, he would not deplore the time spent in the research: in his progress, almost every complaint to which the human body is subject would fall under his notice, and give him thus an insight into pathology not soon to be forgotten, and which might lay the foundation of new & splendid views. But instead of failing, let us suppose the contrary; that he succeeds in establishing a regular method of proceeding with chronic & at present incurable disorders — that the sum of human misery is daily lessened — and that thro' him Medicine shall shine still brighter in the constellation of the sciences: how will his heart rebound at the cordial & reiterated thanks of relieved human nature, and his soul expand, when he beholds his favourite

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